Joseph Kraft

Intrigues Sweeping Vietnam Surface in 'Berets' Case

SAIGON—When President Nixon came to Saigon a couple of weeks ago he disparaged as "not Vietnam" the well-protected American base at Camranh Bay. But last Thursday Communist saboteurs slipped past all the protection and planted explosive charges that brought death and injuries to nearly a hundred persons. Suddenly, even Camranh had become part of Vietnam.

That little incident suggests what is now the prevailing atmosphere in this country. It is an atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty where all things are possible, especially the least expected. With the lapse in the fighting, the events that now loom largest here have as their common denominator the surprise penetration, the double-cross, the friendship betrayed, the quick switcheroo.

Take, for example, the intriguing case of Col. Robert Rheault, a former commander of the Green Berets, or Special Forces, in Vietnam. Col. Rheault is accused of playing a part in the premeditated murder of a South Vietnamese citizen. Apart from that very little is known.

But there has been a Niagara of speculation about why an investigation, which has almost never before been conducted in what must be a multitude of similar cases, has been ordered on this occasion. One theory features the notion that the victim was a double agent, working for both the Communists and the allied (South Vietnamese cum American) forces. The idea is that he was murdered as an enemy agent, but that the allied agency employing him then brought the pressure that resulted in the investigation.

A SECOND NOTION is that leading Saigon politicos are behind the affair. The idea is that they got wind of the killing and then brought pressure to bear on the United States. Why? Because the high officials wanted to become known as men who could take their distances from the Americans, the better to make a complete switch at some later time.

A similar strain of duplicity runs through the reorganization of the cabinet which has been in the works for about three weeks now. The American embassy would like to keep Prime Minister Tran Van Huong in place because he is reckoned to be strong in fighting for social welfare and against corruption. President Nguyen Van Thieu, who is arranging the cabinet reshuffle, was also supposed to favor retention of Huong as prime minister.

But last Friday the six leaders of the chief political organization backing President Thieu sent the president a public letter requesting that they oust Huong. Among them was the president's most intimate personal political adviser. But was the letter just an effort to force President Thieu's hand? Or did he cook up the whole thing himself in order to seem to be under irresistible pressure to replace the man the Americans want to keep on as prime minister?

STILL ANOTHER case of mysterious intrigue is the case of Huynh Van Trong, an official working for President Thieu on projects to broaden the political base of the government. Trong has been arrested by the Vietnamese equivalent of the FBI, under suspicion of dealing with the other side. But was he deceiving Thieu? Or was he carrying out the president's orders? Or has the whole thing been trumped up by security police to queer various schemes for dealing with the Communists?

A final example arises from the sentencing of three men to life imprisonment for the attempted murder of Prime Minister Huong. Two of the three were former soldiers in the government forces. One had been trained for an elite Ranger unit and had participated in a government offensive only a year ago.

In themselves, none of these incidents is particularly important. But they convey what is perhaps the central fact of Vietnam at the time: The start of American troop withdrawals has made everybody realise that a new kind of power arrangement is shaping up.

All those who count are positioning themselves in advance, opening up new contacts, cutting embarrassing ties, getting ready for whatever is in the works. While nobody knows exactly what it is, there are apt to be some startling flipflops, some strange deals, some amazing alliances and betrayals—even at the very top of the political pyramid. For in Vietnam, Mars has had his day. The time of Machiavelli is at hand.

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